

Superior museum celebrates the accordion

Frankie Yankovic and Lawrence Welk would have loved this place, way up in the city of Superior, way down in the basement of a former Presbyterian church.

Here rests about 1,000 accordions, the humble and the complex, the world's most rare models and the more commonplace. There are about 700 more of these instruments upstairs, where the church altar has been converted into a professional concert stage.



MARY BERGIN

A World of Accordions Museum opened in April, as a part of the Harrington Arts Center. The facility is unusual because it chronicles the world history of the instrument.

Music scholars from as far away as Austria have come to use the museum's archives. Some of the world's finest accordionists have performed in the 1,000-seat concert hall.

It is all the work of Helmi Harrington, whose mother made a living by playing, repairing and teaching others how to play the accordion. The two moved to the United States from Germany, shortly after World War II and Helmi's birth.

Harrington Arts Center also is the home of the nation's only technical college program for accordion and concertina repair. Helmi came up with the curriculum in 1991 and says a good technician can make as much as a doctor. Her students come from all over the country.

"This is what I've chosen to do with the earnings of my life," she said, nodding toward the museum's contents. She describes the accordion as both a humble and "exceedingly complex" family of instruments.

It also is one that "set forth a dream that took decades to realize, and you're standing in it now." Helmi, who has a doctorate in

If you go

For more about A World of Accordions Museum, go to accordionworld.org or call 715-395-2787. Museum admission is \$10.

Concert hall performances in the next few months will include the K Trio of Connecticut (ktrio.com) and Just Du-et of Minneapolis (atracordion.com). Dates, times and ticket prices will be posted as plans are completed.

musicology and has been a Mensa member, worked her way through school by playing and teaching the accordion, although her intent was to become a concert pianist.

She recalls that a gifted classmate at the University of Houston gave her a simple button accordion. It was a mere toy, she thought, especially when placed next to the spotlight of the classmate's grand piano. But it also prompted Helmi to think about how there should be a way to preserve the immense history and cultural connections that the accordion has fostered.

"It is the modest, everyday, salt-of-the-earth people who invented the accordion, reinvented it and made it popular," Helmi says.

She argues that it was a popular instrument because "it could quickly return the ethnic heritage to a culture," providing the rhythms to dance and celebrate.

The first patent goes back to 1829. Helmi's collection has been selected carefully — "everything is here for a purpose," the curator says. She patiently explains how the instrument evolved from a simple push-pull of bellows to an elaborate collage of scales, keys and pitches.

Some accordion makers added bells and horns, literally. Others put the music on rollers, like a player piano, to make the music making look easy.

Then there is the Pignini Mythos, a \$65,000 instrument that wasn't



MARY BERGIN PHOTOS

Helmi Harrington has devoted her life to accordions.

sold to just anyone. "You'd have to prove that you could play before you could buy it," Helmi says.

Accordion ornamentation could be elaborate, with detailed carvings, etchings, rhinestones, abalone. Keyboards became curved, or were moved to the center, as manufacturers became more competitive during the height of vaudeville.

Eventually, there was mass production through Sears catalogs, and now merely a half-dozen accordion manufacturers remain.

The Superior museum contains examples of all of this, as well as figurines of accordionists and artwork made by the musicians. There also is a small collection of accordion humor. "Yes, we can laugh at ourselves," Helmi says.

She keeps 20 to 25 accordions for herself, "when I want to feed my soul."

Helmi also gives accordion lessons from her home studio, and she is thankful that the instrument has a big following in northern Wisconsin. "It's a fine place to be," she says, but her work is not finished.

Helmi notes that Castelfidardo, Italy, has the world's largest accordion museum.



There are 1,000 accordions — antique, contemporary, simple, elaborate, hand-crafted and mass-produced models — in A World of Accordions Museum, Superior.

"We're going to fight that," she says, matter-of-factly.